THE FOLKLORE OF BREASTFEEDING*

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THE American woman has liberated herself right into oppression. She has declared her freedom and sovereignty in one of the "life crises"[1] most exclusive to women: birth and lactation. She has dismissed her obstetrician as a sadistic chauvinist and is having her babies at home. She has smashed the baby bottles and poured the pharmaceutical industry's formulas down the drain. She has become a champion of nature's ancient practice of breastfeeding.

As more and more young mothers take up nursing, more and more old wives' tales are reappearing. Some are the ones our grandmothers heard when they were new mothers, such as "Do not eat any chocolate" or "Wean the baby when he gets his first tooth." Other admonitions are as up-to-date as the energy crunch: "Do not nurse in an automobile because the baby will get 'gas.' " Considering the amount of time spent in automobiles by the average American today, such a restriction could prove a hardship indeed for both the mother and her suckling.

From the time of parturition or even during her pregnancy, as soon as she declares her intention to nurse, the new mother is beset with conflicting advice: you cannot nurse if your breasts are too small; you cannot nurse if your breasts are too large; nursing is easier if you are not too large-busted; short women with full hips and breasts are best suited to nursing. If she is less than 20 years of age, the mother can forget the whole problem anyway, she is advised, because her body will not produce milk.

Indeed, the mother's health is supposedly in a perilous state during the entire period of nursing. At the least she will get fat or suffer dizzy spells from lack of liquids. Should the baby bite her in the breast, she is told, cancer will appear in that breast within the year. If she believes that she can weather all this trauma and is still determined to breastfeed, the real trials lie ahead.

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I have collected a sample of the beliefs that are presented in oral circulation. Since the best place to find this folklore material seemed to be with nursing mothers themselves, I enlisted the cooperation of La Leche League, an international organization which encourages women to nurse. The bulk of its membership comes from the United States: educated, middle-class to upper-class women who vigorously expouse a return to the natural method of nourishing infants. Ironically, at the same time women in some deprived areas of the world are abandoning breastfeeding at an alarming rate because they believe it to be "low class" and "illiterate."

The La Leche League ran a notice in its March-April 1973 *News* asking for any folk beliefs, superstitions, old wives' tales, and the like about nursing and mother's milk. It was emphasized that these might be true or—as the editor put it—"wildly untrue," as long as they had been transmitted orally. During the subsequent six months I received replies from all sections of the United States and five foreign countries.

In addition, I recorded items that I had heard at league meetings when my own children were babies. Yet when I returned some three years later and asked specifically for contributions to my folklore survey, there was silence. No one knew any folk beliefs. The women knew only "facts" passed on by grandmothers, neighbors, or even by their own physicians. Several doctors told patients to drink lots of milk as "milk makes milk." This aphorism has become so common as to fall in the category of proverbial expressions.

The present study contains no items from printed sources. No attempt has been made to supply analogies.

Super-Foods

It has been shown in physiological studies that the consumption of cow's milk does not result in the instant manufacture of human milk. It is, rather, the adequate intake of fluids which produces free lactation. In most countries adults would not even dream of drinking milk. In Germany the magic elixir is malt beer; this belief was imported into the United States and now is widely held here. A New Jersey informant suggested drinking lots of wine, while a mother in the Bible belt countered that alcohol gets into the milk and makes the baby sleepy.

With regard to preferred foods for the nursing mother, interestingly, the favored ones are the most plentiful local products. Thus, in South

Africa women are advised to consume large quantities of peanuts. A friend of mine from Johannesburg thoughtfully brought me a can of peanuts to welcome my new son. When the hospital nurse caught sight of it she summarily removed it from the room, muttering that peanuts would dry up the supply of milk.

Dr. D. B. Jelliffe, the internationally known nutritionist, has termed these popular products "cultural super-foods." [2] They are the ones which the community cultivates most heavily as the prime source of its calories and often of its protein. Much emotional value is often attached to these foods and they are woven into local religion, mythology, and history. I also received praise for oatmeal (Minnesota) and for two fried pies a day (Georgia).

The list of proscribed foods, however, is much longer: cabbage (it will make the baby gassy), onions (they will give the baby colic), anything spicy, fruit juice (too acid), and coffee. One informant warned not to drink tea, but opinion ran four to one against her. Some women advised drinking hot or iced tea before each nursing in order to increase the supply of milk.

From Argentina I received a sample packet of *raiz taxi*, an herb which is brewed as tea and drunk twice a day. Mothers attest to its value in aiding the "let-down reflex," which is essential to satisfactory breastfeeding.

The food which produces the greatest trepidation is chocolate. Most common is the dictum that the mother's eating or drinking any form of chocolate will result in the infant's having diarrhea. But there are almost as many "authorities" who will tell you that chocolate is "binding" (constipating) for the baby. From Fairfield, Conn., came the report that chocolate will dry up the milk outright while, contrariwise, from Sun Prairie, Wis., came the suggestion that lots of chocolate should be eaten to produce more milk.

Magic

Now to enter the never-never world of magic. The unsuspecting mother is the hapless victim of a whole range of homeopathic machinations. This is the branch of magic which works on the principle that like produces like (the classic pins-in-the-doll bit).

The analogy that comes most readily to mind for the lactating human is that of a cow. It therefore follows that what is good for Bossy

is thought to be good for mother. The woman is told to drink alfalfa tea or pull the plant straight up from the field and munch on it. Eating alfalfa sprouts was advised as a nursing hint on the Dinah Shore television show in 1973 by Susan St. James. This superstition now undoubtedly will be appearing much more frequently in popular circulation.

Everyone knows that the farmer will not allow his cows to graze near an apple orchard; hence the belief that eating apples will dry up a mother's milk supply. The idea that milk makes milk would also fall under this law of imitative magic.

A reported "sure cure" for breast canker (a lay term for mammary infection or cracked nipples) is to strip the bark from a black alder tree, bake it with water in a bean pot for 24 hours, mix with honey, and drink slowly. In a week's time, as the raw trunk of the alder heals so does the woman's infection, according to this suggestion from Maine.

This procedure seems to be a variant of the well-known folk cures of "plugging" and "passing through," which are often used to treat childhood diseases. Dr. Wayland Hand of the Center for the study of comparative Folklore and Mythology at the University of California at Los Angeles has been engaged for many years in collecting medical folklore. He has commented: "In all of my work in folk medicine I do not think I have come upon a combination of natural and magical medicine just like the item you have given." [3] Dr. Hand further described practices of "passing through" and "plugging" as follows:

> The tree sapling is usually split open . . . and then the child is passed through the tree with certain ritualistic and even magical acts. After this, then, the tree is bound up, usually with vines or common cordage. As the split in the tree heals; so will the rupture. In plugging the same principle of healing is involved. A hole is bored into a tree with a gimlet, and then something that was in contact with the sick person is put into the hole, which is then stobbed at with a dowel or some other kind of peg. The material put in may range all the way from pieces of hair, [to] bandages, fingernails, or whatever. Healing takes place when the bark grows over the peg.

From eastern Kentucky comes a report of the power of similarity: if the mother witnesses a death she should not nurse soon after because the baby will die immediately.

The temperature of breast milk is a cause of great anxiety. It is

especially feared that the milk will become chilled. Therefore, the mother must wear long sleeves to keep her arms warm, bundle up her chest during cold weather, never put her hands into cold water or touch frozen meat, never drink anything cold just before nursing, and always wear a sweater during nursing. The hazards from warm milk do not seem to be considered as great, but one informant warned that the use of hot packs as a treatment for engorgement of the breasts would make the milk too hot for the baby to drink. Sunbathing and walking about during the heat of summer were also cited by some Southerners as activities which would sour the milk.

Rocking while nursing, mothers are admonished, shakes up the milk. When walking barefoot the mother may get "a weed in her breast;" this is a colloquialism for a mammary infection (the advice comes from Arkansas).

Contagious magic seems to be less of a threat. This belief postulates that things once joined will always act on each other. Footprints or nail parings are considered especially efficacious. An informant in Brazil asserts that if breast milk drops to the floor and the mother steps on it her milk supply will instantly dry up. From Ceylon comes a description of the practice of hanging the afterbirth on a fig tree. Since figs contain latex, contact with the placenta is believed to stimulate milk production in the mother.

Emotions and Activities of the Mother

As if all this were not enough to drive a young mother to distraction or to the formula section of the nearest supermarket, she also is advised to be on guard never to have a scare, to be nervous, to get angry, or to have any sexual excitement in order to avoid having her milk turn sour. Going to sleep while nursing or missing a feeding is said to have a similar effect.

The mother's posture while nursing is also important: she should never sit up; she should never lie down. The latter will cause ear infection or may choke the baby to death. Either way he will become deaf because he is held so tightly in breastfeeding.

Should the baby have teeth early, it is considered a more accurate indicator than the A-Z Test that another baby is on the way. Continued nursing after pregnancy will result in a deformity of the new infant or poisoning of the older child.

On the positive side, however, breast milk is believed to have curative powers. Squirted into the baby's nose, it is said to relieve nasal congestion.

Weaning

If the mother looks to folklore for information on when to wean, she will be baffled indeed. If you nurse a baby after it is two years old it will have pinworms. You should nurse until the child cuts its two-year molars. Milk will dry up after six months. At one month (or six weeks, nine months, or 11 months) the mother's milk turns to water. Do not nurse a male baby beyond 11 months. Nurse babies through their second summer. You cannot nurse a baby through two Good Fridays.

The widespread belief among mothers today that you must not wean a baby in the summer seems to be a "survival." Now a folk belief, it once had a basis in medical fact. Before the advent of modern refrigeration and pasteurization there was a real risk in putting a baby on cow's milk during hot weather.

To accelerate the process of weaning, the mother is told she should put cabbage leaves in her brassiere so that her milk will dry up. Almost instantaneous weaning would seem assured if the recommendation of putting mustard on the mother's nipples were followed.

Late weaning has been traditional in preliterate societies. In folktales we find that culture heroes and giants frequently had a long suckling period: Beowulf, for instance. A man called Strong John who appears in a number of English tales goes thrashing about uprooting trees while he is still nursing. His mother's method of weaning was drastic (and probably would not be sanctioned by La Leche League)—she curtly ordered him from the house. The folklorist Alexander Krappe commented in his *Science of Folklore*, published in 1929, that late weaning is a "common custom among the lower orders of European society and the poor whites of the former Slave states of the Union."[4]

Today, as we noted earlier, there has been a reverse trend. Now it is the affluent and better-educated who are breastfeeding for long periods. La Leche advises that no solid foods whatsoever be given for four to six months and that nursing be continued for as long as the child and the mother desire.

American women may be somewhat harassed by all these super-

stitions, but with the help of physicians, the La Leche League, and their own scientific knowledge, they are able to resist the pressures for the most part. But folk wisdom is not to be discounted altogether even in our enlightened technological age. A young mother in Grand Rapids, Mich., wrote to me about a family reunion that she had attended. Surrounded by several generations, this girl sat nursing her infant son. The 94-year-old family matriarch came upon her and they fell into talk about babies and breastfeeding. The venerable wise-woman advised her granddaughter to drink a glass of beer every night, even if she did not like the taste and to wean the baby at 11 months because milk turned to water then. She was amazed at modern childbirth practices, especially that of going to a hospital for delivery. In her day, she said, they sent for the doctor when the time was near. If he was not available there was always a neighbor woman who would come to assist. The old lady was even more astounded when she heard the fees now being charged to bring a child into the world. "How can a baby cost all that much," she asked "when the mother does all the work?"

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Van Gennep, A.: *The Rites of Passage,* Vizedom, B. and Caffee, G. L., translators. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1960. According to Arnold van Gennep, the "life crises" are: birth, social puberty (which does not necessarily coincide with physiological puberty), marriage, parenthood, advancement to a higher social class, occupational specialization, and death. Each society has particular ceremonies, or *rites de passage,* to mark the transition from one stage of life to the next.
2. Jelliffe, D. B.: *Child Nutrition in Developing Countries.* Washington, D. C., U. S. Dept. of State, 1969, pp. 62-63.
3. Hand, W.: Personal communication. March 21, 1974.
4. Krappe, A. H.: *The Science of Folklore.* New York, Barnes and Noble, 1929, p. 35.